



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Billings Field Office
5001 Southgate Drive, PO Box 36800
Billings, Montana 59107-6800



IN REPLY TO:
4700

April 28, 2005

Dear Interested Party:

The Billings Field Office (BiFO) has developed an Environmental Assessment (MT-010-05-16) outlining relevant information about the Pryor Mountain wild horse herd and presenting alternatives for suppressing herd growth rates. Under the proposed action, 20 mares aged 11 years and older would receive primer and booster doses (or just booster doses) of a one-year immunocontraceptive Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP) vaccine. This EA also addresses the justification, methods and procedures to be used in implementing this action, and addresses the environmental impacts of such action on the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range (PMWHR). The EA is available at <http://www.mt.blm.gov/bifo/index.html> or by contacting BiFO.

Current estimates place the wild horse herd at 139 total animals. Since 1994, the PMWHR herd has averaged 158 total horses. Available genetic research suggests that maintaining an average of ~140-150 horses on the Pryors might facilitate genetic conservation within the herd. Unfortunately updated range health and trend studies provide clear evidence that the designated range is unable to support this number of horses at the present time. Extensive interagency discussions have clearly established that range expansion opportunities within the upper elevations are not possible at this time. Although lower elevation NPS lands may be available to the herd, only a limited number of horses would benefit. As a result, BLM needs to maintain a smaller herd, attentive to the existing AML of $95 \pm 10\%$ horses and with minimal size fluctuations, until such time that range improvements and relief from drought facilitate an overall improving trend in rangeland health. Natural mortality (including the unpredictable impacts of predation), coupled with the proposed level of fertility control is expected to accomplish this goal, without taking the herd below the existing AML.

The BLM is required to prepare a separate EA for public review and comments prior to proceeding with fertility control on additional mares. **Public comments to the EA must be submitted in writing, contain original signatures and be postmarked by Friday, June 10th, 2005 which allows for a 30-day comment period.** The proposed fertility control implementation is scheduled to begin no earlier than July 15, 2005 and will continue until all mares have received a booster vaccine conferring one year of infertility.

The public is also notified that the BLM intends to carefully monitor the impacts of births and deaths within the herd this year. It is possible that the resulting herd size may require further evaluation of the need for a gather and removal of excess horses later this year. If this is the case, the BLM will release an additional EA, evaluating alternatives for immediate herd size reduction for public review and comment.

Thank you for your interest in the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range. We appreciate your input into the decision-making process and look forward to receiving your comments. If you have questions concerning this EA, please contact Linda Coates-Markle, State Wild Horse and Burro Specialist at (406) 896-5013.

Sincerely,

Sandra S. Brooks
Billings Field Manager